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ABSTRACT

Individuals who are beyond the age of 85 have to confront the decrements of aging that are commonly recognized. This study examined the daily routine of the oldest old through interviews. Subjects were asked about the logistics of their daily lives, what they liked best to do, what they didn't like to do, what made a day good for them, and what made a day bad. The results of the interviews indicated that time during the day had to be reallocated to accommodate the disproportionate number of hours necessarily devoted to personal care and household maintenance. These tasks could become the focus of the day, rather than incidental chores interspersed in the day's activities. In order to express and maintain a sense of self in the face of such radical change, individuals established behavioral routines with daily markers. There was a rhythm to the days and nights which may be orchestrated around meals, regulated by health care, governed by prayer, timed to specific television programs, or interrupted by time to rest. How one experienced the day was generally a reflection of mood. Optimism, faith, and the ability to maintain independence also contribute to the experience of a good day. Although socializing predominated among favorite things to do, solitary pursuits were equally noted. (Quotations from the interviews are included throughout the paper.) (ABL)

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THE DAILY ROUTINE OF THE OLDEST OLD

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THE DAILY ROUTINE OF THE OLDEST OLD

Barbara Barer MSW

INTRODUCTION

In studying what life is like in advanced old age, we were interested in learning how older people spend their days. What do they do all day? Is their time spent differently from ours? What makes them behave the way they do? How do their actions affect the way they feel? Or, how does the way they feel, affect their actions? Individuals who are beyond the age of 85 have to confront the decrements of aging that are commonly recognized. Limited mobility is a major constraint that begins with having to give up one's car. Limited ambulation imposes further restrictions, as does the insidious loss of energy. Impaired hearing and decreased vision cause hardships in one's social interactions. Additionally, many in this age group have outlived their peers. These declines in functioning and social contact have repercussions which influence the daily activities of individuals who are are 88, 92, or 96 years old.

We can begin to understand the distinctiveness of this pioneer group of survivors through an examination of their daily routine, as described in their own words. We questioned respondents on the logistics of their daily lives, what they liked best to do, what they didn't like to do, what made a day good for them, what made a day bad? The pacing of daily activities reflects how individuals come to terms with the limitations imposed upon them. Among members of this age

group is a wide range of strategies which they have devised to cope with changing bodies, shrinking physical environments and diminished social ties.

ALLOCATION OF TIME

Time during the day has to be reallocated to accommodate the disproportionate number of hours necessarily devoted to personal care and household maintenance. These tasks can become the focus of the day, rather than incidental chores interspersed in the day's activities, as when one is younger. In the words of one respondent, "What used to take me 3 hours, now takes me 3 days." More specifically, an 86 year old woman explained, "I'm a good half hour in the bathroom, to start with. I don't "spend" the morning, it's taken! Lunch takes 2 hours. I take medicine at 6 a.m. 2 p.m. and 10 pm. and I gauge my life by that. Everything is scheduled."

Evenings are abbreviated, with men and women of this age preparing for bed immediately after dinner, or close to 8 o'clock. Thus there are fewer waking hours which further diminishes the number of effective hours in the day.

ESTABLISHING ROUTINES

In order to express and maintain a sense of self in the face of such radical change, individuals establish behavioral routines, with daily markers. There is a rhythm to the days and nights which may be orchestrated around meals, regulated by health care, governed by prayer, timed to specific TV programs, or interrupted by time to rest. In examining the

daily routine we can begin to recognize the characteristics of a way of life which are specific to this age group.

As mentioned, personal care and household maintenance command priority. In order to muster the energy to attend to these tasks some other activities must be relinquished. As an 89 year old woman stated, "Before I used to have so many more important things to do. I never thought about myself. Today, to reach from here to there is a project."

Through case studies we can see how individuals restructure their lives and regulate their activities. Let me give you an example of a precise routine confined to a narrow range of activity that one 92 year old woman has worked out for herself. Miss Gibson is a striking woman who stands erect, dresses elegantly and still looks and behaves like the independent business woman that she was. Never married, she lives alone in her apartment. She says, "I may look well, but I'm in pain practically all the time. I figure out my own health programs. I won't let myself down. I get up at 5 a.m. and I pray for 2 hours. Then I make breakfast which is a conglomeration of things. I measure out one tablespoon each of nuts, seeds, bran, and oats, add 4 prunes, lots of water, and cook it for 15 minutes. By then I've been standing too much so I do something to move around, like make my bed and clean up. I listen to certain radio programs. Svendahl at 7 a.m., Paul Harvey at 8:30. I take care of my little apartment. I time myself with everything. If I'm on my feet

for a couple of hours, I lie down. I finish all that by 11 a.m. I usually try to be dressed by 11, it depends on the pain. That's my program."

Undaunted, Miss Gibson follows a carefully patterned habit of regularity which allows her to retain a sense of control. A truly orchestrated day was described by an energetic 87 year old musician who, unsolicited, gave a minute by minute account of his morning schedule and then exclaimed that Bong! Exactly at 12 o'clock he sat down to lunch. He was meticulous about describing not only what he ate, but that he ate the exact same thing at the same hour every day! He was emphatic in stating that the regularity of everything is very important! Such concern with ritual and specific dietary regulations illustrates a pattern of behavior which is adopted to gain control over one's physical environment.

The control which these respondents exhibit, involves an active problem-solving approach to life, which contrasts with those fewer in our sample, who relinquish control and succumb to a state of inertia and rationalization. Retaining a sense of control is an orientation in the elderly which has been associated with greater self-confidence and adapatability.

CONTINUITY - SELF IMAGE

Certain chores or activities may be divided among the hours of the day, or the days of the week. Mrs. Scott, an alert 86 year old retired teacher who happens to still drive,

summarizes her strategy for routine in this way. "I set the alarm for 6:45 because if I don't start early, nothing happens. I take a 2 hour rest in the middle of the day, which is distressing, to lose two hours midday. Monday I do housework, Tuesday I do paper work, Wednesday I swim in the morning. Thursday I keep for visiting friends and Friday I go to a lecture series. I like to keep up. I do my grocery shopping on Monday and Friday."

Setting an alarm clock to wake up in the morning was rather unique for this age group. But in this way Mrs. Scott reaffirms her sense of continuing competence and adequacy. Similarly, a 94 year old man preserves his self-image by maintaining his dignified appearance. He proudly explains that, "Every day I put on a tie and a clean shirt. I notice that very few do, but I still persist. I've always done that."

Several less active respondents reported that their daily activities were purposely regulated around specific television programs. Television plays a significant role in the lives of many homebound elderly, providing structure to the day, and access to the news of the world, entertainment, and companionship. Someone even said that, "my TV is my best friend."

An important element that sustains this age group is the familiarity of one's home environment. The average number of years that our respondents have lived in their current

residences is 27 and a half years. Environmental surroundings are often endowed with meanings based on personal experiences. Such personal meaning vested in a home was well expressed in the words of one widow, still residing in her family home of 55 years. "I really love this place. I feel so surrounded by my past here and supported by it. This house is just very full of supportive memories for me." This is a home in which she raised 4 children.

MOOD

In spite of relishing good memories, most respondents live in the present and we asked them about the positive and negative aspects of their current days. As one 92 year old gentleman simply stated, "The distinction between a good day and a bad day depends on how vigorous I happen to feel." The most overwhelming ingredient of a bad day is to be in pain and the greatest objections are to being constrained. For example, "I don't like to not have enough energy." or "I don't like having to rest so much." Second to health and functioning, is loneliness. Over half the sample stressed that a good day resulted from social contact, from time spent with other people, whether it was a visit from family, seeing a grandchild or going out to lunch. Sometimes it is hard to reconcile the realities of a person's age with some of the favorite activities they describe. Activities such as square dancing, going to the horse races, taking a bus to Reno, having an ocean swim in November, entertaining friends for

bridge and lunch, or seving meals to the homeless. A surprising amount of volunteer work is undertaken by this age group.

How one experiences the day is generally a reflection of mood. The more depressed naturally dwell on the negatives, with statements such as "Every day is bad as far as I'm concerned. These haven't been the golden years for me. They aren't even silver." Or, as one homebound lady lamented, "I don't like to sit in the chair and look at the ceiling." Bad weather or certain times of the day can influence how one feels. A lady in her 90s explained, "When it's foggy and cold all the "itises" come on - the aches and pains from arthritis, tendonitis, bursitis..." For others, "it's not the days that are so bad, but the nights are long."

On the other hand it is one respondent's opinion that one can control the quality of her days, that "... you make your own days..You can make a bad day if you want to. Strong will power, that helps a lot." Good days are filled with optimism. A 93 year old man asserted that "Every day is a good day. I always look forward to the next day." Faith sustains others, "There are no bad days. I thank God for all the days." The ability to maintain independence also contributes to the experience of a good day. "I enjoy every day. I'm so thankful that I can do things for myself. I don't ask for anything else." Other definitions of a good day rest on external factors which affect one's mood, such as

"beautiful weather," "good news," or "A Democract being elected!"

Although socializing predominated among favorite things to do, solitary pursuits were equally noted. Time spent alone immersed in a hobby or interest can be gratifying. Such solitude is explained as being different from feeling lonely or isolated. Two types of orientations were noted in the sample. Those who are active and who like to be with others, versus those who are more passive and prefer to be alone. Among favorite solitary, passive endeavors mentioned were meditating, stamp collecting, writing, enjoying music and nature. 95 year old Mrs. Jones revealed her passion for crossword puzzles "I do all the crossword puzzles every day. I love them. On Sunday I do the two big ones in the paper. It takes all day and it keeps my mind going." On the other hand, an 86 year old grandfather said that he enjoyed painting but that right now it was too quiet to sit down and paint. That maybe he'd take up painting again when he was older! What is universal in maintaining a positive mood is the importance of not sitting idle all day long.

CONCLUSION

Finally, one 95 year old woman reassured us that "every day is good. I go to bed at night and take inventory. It's the truth. Everything does fall into place."

Through case studies we can see how individuals summon their strengths, restructure their lives and regulate their

daily activities in order to adapt to the ongoing challenges of life at 85, 90, 95 and 100.